DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 550 CS 509 749

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TITLE Speech Criticism, Group Presentations, and Centrality: A Marriage Made in Heaven for the Basic Public Speaking Course.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (83rd, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1997).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Communication Skills; *Critical Thinking; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Learning Strategies; *Public Speaking; *Student Development; Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS Oral Presentations

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exercise which serves as an addition to public speaking courses. Showing students how to uncover the speech patterns that shape their lives allows them to appreciate the importance of speech communication in their lives. In the exercise, groups analyze speeches and report their findings to the class. The exercise improves presentation skills and enables students to become better consumers of public discourse. The exercise is divided into three phases: phase one--"Developing a Knowledge Base"; phase two--"Sample Critique"; and phase three--"Criticizing and Reporting." Each phase is accompanied by step-by-step instructions, procedures, objectives, and time requirements. This group assignment meshes with the course purpose because it enhances both critical thinking and presentation skills. (CR)

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Speech Criticism, Group Presentations, and Centrality:

A Marriage Made in Heaven

For the Basic Public Speaking Course

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Submitted to the GIFTS forum for the 1997 SCA convention.

Note: We will distribute copies of this lesson plan at the presentation if this proposal is included in a GIFTS panel.

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For the Basic Public Speaking Course

Centrality: This exercise is a valuable addition to public speaking courses but also speaks to the centrality theme of the convention. By centrality, we refer to the unalterable fact that speech patterns shape social reality. By showing students how to uncover the patterns that shape their lives, they come to appreciate the importance of speech communication in their lives.

Goal: To develop critical thinking and presentation skills through the analyses of speeches.

Introduction

A couple of the frustrations we encounter in our public speaking classes involves utilizing group presentations in a maximally profitable way and finding the time to meaningfully discuss speech criticism. To address these frustrations, we decided to have groups analyze speeches and report their findings to the class. The result was amazing. The exercise improved presentation skills, enabled students to become better consumers of public discourse, and helped them appreciate the role speech communication plays in their lives. The exact nature of this unit is presented below.

Procedure

I. Phase One: Developing a Knowledge Base

- A. Set up groups of 5-6 people.
- B. The groups are expected to read and discuss a speech criticism book (we use Ayres, 1997; but others could serve this purpose as well, e.g., Andrews, 1973; Arnold, 1974; Bryant & Wallace, 1969, Chapters 23 & 24; Hart, 1990; Sillars, 1991).
- C. The group then takes a test over the book. We usually allow the group to take the test as a group. That is, they can discuss the questions as a group. The individual student can record the group's answer or select a different response. For obvious reasons, students are not told that they will be able to discuss the test as a group until they arrive to take the test.
- D. The tests are graded, returned, and reviewed.

II. Phase Two: Sample Critique

- A. Discuss the historical context of a "Great Speech" and play a video of the speech.
- B. Distribute a written version of the speech.

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C. Lead a discussion that analyzes the speech in light of the criteria that emerged in phase one.

III. Phase Three: Criticizing and Reporting

A. Each group selects an individual speaker or campaign to analyze. The choice is entirely up to the group. **(This assignment can easily be adapted to address diversity issues by restricting selection procedures.)** We provide a set of suggestions for their assistance (lists of speakers and campaigns can be found in the appendices of various books--e.g., Ayres 1997 and Hart 1989), but groups are free to select any speaker or campaign they find of interest. The only rule we invoke is that a given speaker/campaign can only be used by one group. The first group that makes a selection gets it.

B. Each group is responsible for analyzing the material selected. The text serves as the primary analytic guide, but students are encouraged to consult other work on speech criticism.

C. The groups are expected to divide the task so that each group member has a particular analytic responsibility. For instance, once a speaker is selected, each person might analyze a different speech that the speaker delivered.

D. Each group is required to report their findings. All the requirements of informative speaking apply to this report--the presentation needs to gain/maintain attention, provide "new" information, be organized, use developmental variety, and so forth. Groups are encouraged to be innovative. We have had groups come to class in period costumes and deliver a speech in the style of the period to set the scene for their report. Others, using contemporary material, have organized their presentations using a talk show format.

E. Each group member is expected to write a 2-5 page paper analyzing the material for which she or he was responsible.

F. Grading--This assignment is worth 110 points out of 400 points.

1. Test--25 points (this test is given over the assigned reading)
2. Presentation--60 points (graded using informative speech criteria)
3. Paper--25 points (graded for organization, writing quality, appropriateness of examples, and the overall general quality of the critique)

Time Requirements

Phase One: Two and one half class sessions

Phase Two: One class session

Phase Three: a. Group workshops–two and one half class sessions

b. Group presentations–five class sessions for a class of 25

Conclusion

This assignment has converted our two biggest frustrations with the basic public speaking course into a source of joy. This group assignment meshes nicely with the course purpose because the assignment enhances both critical thinking and presentation skills.

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